# HAIL MARY

December 13, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 1:26-33

**"And the angel came to her and said, 'Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!'" --Luke 1:28 (RSV)**

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is a delightful book about some children and their Sunday School Christmas pageant and it is about the Herdmans, who the author describes as "the absolutely worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain." [Barbara Robinson, p. 1]

The horrible Herdmans have decided to be in the Christmas pageant, but they don't even know the Christmas story. So at the first rehearsal the director decides to begin by reading to the children from the nativity story in the Bible. The narrator is a youngster - whose mother is the Christmas pageant director.

Mother read, "Joseph and Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child..."

"Pregnant!" yelled Ralph Herdman.

Well, that stirred things up. All the big kids began to giggle and all the little kids wanted to know what was so funny; and Mother had to hammer on the floor with a blackboard pointer. "That's enough, Ralph," she said, and went on with the story.

"I don't think it's very nice to say Mary was pregnant," Alice whispered to me.

"But she was," I pointed out. In a way, though, I agreed with her. It sounded too ordinary. Anybody could be pregnant. "Great with child," sounded better for Mary.

"I'm not supposed to talk about people being pregnant." Alice folded her hands in her lap and pinched her lips together. "I'd better tell my mother."

"Tell her what?"

"That your mother is talking about things like that in church. My mother might not want me to be here."

I was pretty sure she would do it. Her mother, Mrs. Wendleken, didn't even want cats to have kittens or birds to lay eggs, and she wouldn't let Alice play with anybody who had two rabbits. Mary was pregnant! Mary had a baby.

But there wasn't much I could do about it, except pinch Alice, which I did. She yelped, and Mother separated us and made me sit beside Imogene Herdman and sent Alice to sit in the middle of the baby angels." [Ibid., p. 41-42]

Mary was pregnant! Mary had a baby. Try as we might, we can't deny it, hide it - or even disguise it. She may be a stranger to us, but she was undeniably pregnant.

**"Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."**

Every Roman Catholic knows that prayer intimately. It is/has been prayed more frequently than any other prayer with the exception of the Lord's Prayer. It is not prayed by Protestants. As a matter of fact, other than playing a supporting role in our nativity tableaux and Sunday School pageants, Mary is virtually ignored in Protestant piety, theology, worship, and sermons.

Protestants have two problems with the whole topic.

The first is that around this topic there are and have been significant differences between Protestantism and Catholicism. At the time of the Reformation, Luther and his followers swept away centuries of accumulated tradition about the veneration of the Saints. Mary was a casualty of that process. Luther himself said some nice things about her but in liturgy and Protestant practice and theology, she virtually disappeared. And, as happens frequently in history, action stimulates reaction: the more vigorously Protestants dissented about the topic, the more vigorously the Roman church advocated it.

Now, if you are a visiting Roman Catholic, excuse us while we catch up on a topic which is familiar to you... In the middle of the 19th Century the church declared the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, that Mary, like Jesus, had become conceived immaculately, without sin. A century later, 1950, Pope Pius XII proclaimed, with full Papal infallibility, the Bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven. In Protestantism, the criterion for the truth of a doctrine is the Bible. That's what makes us Protestant, in a sense. Roman Catholicism uses as a criteria for truth, Scripture but also the church - its traditions, councils and now, the Pope when he speaks "ex-cathedra." We play by different rules here.

The point is that Catholics have seemed most Catholic around the topic of Mary. And so - we have become most Protestant by ignoring her, which is too bad.

The second problem comes from within our own family. The Virgin Birth itself has become a litmus test of orthodoxy for many Protestants. In the early part of this century, in reaction to what seemed like a wave of easy liberalism, a series of books appeared which set out to define the "Fundamentals of the Christian Faith." Among those "fundamentals" were the "Innerancy of Scripture, and the Virgin Birth." The term "Fundamentalist" was first used to describe the partisans of this approach. One of the unfortunate products was that Mary's virginity became far more important than it is in the Bible. It became a test case. If you believed it - you were a Christian. If you had trouble with it - you were not.

The Bible is less than definitive on the topic. The Old Testament passage in Isaiah 7 which is cited as a prophetic proof text is unclear. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." The original Hebrew read "a young woman shall conceive." Somehow, when Hebrew got translated into Greek, "young woman" became "virgin."

In the New Testament, not much is made of the topic. Mark and John do not mention it. It appears that Paul never heard of it. At least, the New Testament does not hold it up as a test of faith.

What gets lost in all of that is the power Mary had maintained across the centuries. She has inspired some of the most sublime art in all of history. It is impossible not to contemplate the Pieta, a replica which stands in St. Patrick's in New York, without being deeply and profoundly moved. Shrines to the Blessed Virgin continue to be very popular. Furthermore, the piety is often politically revolutionary. Our Lady of Guadalupe is a partisan of the poor and oppressed. And Polish officials know that the annual pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Black Madonna is overtly nationalistic and patriotic and therefore potentially violent: Polish officials watch it very carefully.

On the other hand, psychologists have pointed out that all of the church doctrine about Mary came from the hearts and minds of celibate men who, at least in the Middle Ages, were committed to the notion that sex was evil. In a particularly good book, from a feminist perspective, Alone Of All Her Sex, the author, Maria Warner, observes that "men who denied themselves women needed a woman on whom to pour out love, while women, suffering beneath a social system which denigrated womanhood, needed a woman's compassion to ease their pain."

"Hail Mary" - today? Presbyterian Robert MaAfee Brown suggests that Catholics and Protestants - particularly Protestants, ought to recover something of the Mary of the Bible. We may not want to call her Queen of Heaven, or Mother of God, but she was, after all, the Mother of Jesus. Regardless of whatever else you believe about her, or cannot believe about her, she carried him in her body. She gave him life. She fed, bathed, nurtured, sang to, laughed with - Jesus. "O thou who held the world in thy embrace, I dandled thee," Madeleine L'Engle has Mary say... She

deserves our attention. She is our link with something very important in the whole story. Without Mary, our faith is inclined to become too ethereal, too philosophic, too unearthly. (Mary, Ralph Herdman reminds us, was pregnant!) She is a link between this story and our humanity.

When we pursue the Mary of the Bible, what we find is the first disciple. Think of it... A teen-ager, probably early teens, engaged to a carpenter, suddenly and mysteriously pregnant, bearing that shame, somehow managing to keep the obligation to Joseph; delivering her child in the middle of an arduous journey, in a barn, dark, smelly, cold. Think of her faith through all of that, the faith of a child... Frederick Buechner has a wonderful picture...

> "She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.
>
> "He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said.
>
> "As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl." (Luke 1:26-35) [Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who, p. 39]

Think of her later: Joseph is dead, and her strong carpenter son who was her support, walks away from that Nazareth home to do what? - to preach and teach and heal throughout Galilee. She never understood that very well. She keeps appearing on the edges of the story, gently trying to remind him of something, perhaps simply to tell him that she is there, that she will always be there for him, and that there will always be a home for him in Nazareth if he ever comes to his sense. Think of her, following her son for three years. Think of her, this mother - now perhaps in her middle or late 40's - at the cross, as her son dies, humiliated, abandoned by all, alone, life ebbing out of him... She is there with him, and for him... How much poorer our faith is without those images. Protestant thinking does not include pleading with Mary to "pray for us at the hour of our death" as the Hail Mary prayer requires. But that is a very powerful image and it is a very suggestive idea of a divine love which is real - particularly in the hour of our death.

I will never forget the day in July of 1944 when we learned that my uncle Jack had been killed in Saipan. I was only six. My grandmother was inconsolable. I had never witnessed grief like that. It upset me and I asked my mother about it. I still remember her telling me, "It's the worst thing that can happen. It's worse than dying - to have one of your children die."

Hail Mary. Blessed art thou among women.

And the Mary of the Bible is a dreamer, a visionary, a revolutionary. When she and Elizabeth get together they talk about the meaning of their pregnancies and Mary connects the coming of the Messiah, her baby, with a new world, a new order of things. She is the first Christian activist. Her Magnificat is a revolutionary song about a new kind of society. It is more comfortable in Latin, obviously, because Mary sings about the powerful being scattered and the poor elevated, the hungry fed and the rich sent away empty. "What Mary does," Robert McAfee Brown points out, "is put the mandate for radical change centrally within the Christian story." [Christian Century, 6/3-10/87]

And so, if Christian social activism makes you nervous, and if you find yourself thinking that the Gospel is not related to issues of justice and peace and hunger... If you don't want to have connections made between your assertion that God's Kingdom is now in our midst and the fact that there are homeless and hungry people walking the streets of this city in greater numbers than ever - you are going to have to make your case with Jesus' mother, who believes her son has to do precisely with a new order, a new world in which the poor and the rich will receive justice.

When we recover the Mary of the Bible we find the first Christian disciple and the first social activist. We also gain a theological insight, which I believe is at the critical heart of the matter. When we recover Mary we gain the awareness that Jesus was born - just as you and I were born, just as babies are being born this very minute at Cook County Hospital, in ghettoes, villages, clinics, huts all over the world. It was the same for him; and that undramatic insight, I submit, is one of the most important and one of the most gloriously good pieces of news there is.

We are inclined to disembody Christ and separate him from our own humanness. We are inclined to believe that the physical world is not a good place to be; that this tangible, sensual world is a tempting and suspicious and dubious place, and that our calling is to keep it at arm's length. Left to our own theological devices, we are very much tempted to conjure up a Christ who descended full-grown from heaven in an ethereal white robe, who levitated over the dusty roads of Palestine in order not to get his feet dirty, and who was an Eastern holy man, blissfully innocent of the flesh and the body.

Mary is the corrective. She was pregnant. Jesus was born.

That's what the Apostles' Creed intends to celebrate in the phrase, "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." What the early church was celebrating was the fact that he was conceived; and that he was born - like everyone else. The theological and emotional accent is on the word - "conceived," and the word "born." That's the miracle.

Our Jewish forbears knew that life is God's gift; that God's breath - and God's spirit are what animates us. That is the beauty of the Genesis creation story. They knew what caused conception. They didn't understand why some occasions of sexual intimacy resulted in pregnancy and some did not. But they knew that when life occurred there was a sense in which it is always "conceived by the Holy Ghost."

A lovely ancient Jewish saying expressed it:

> "There are three partners in the production of any human being - the Holy One, blessed be He, the father and the mother."

The miracle occurs every time life begins. That is the miracle we celebrate. God chooses human life. God chooses that most human, worldly and earthy function - human birth - as the way to send a son among us.

The fundamental miracle is not a Virgin Birth. Madeleine L'Engle suggests; "far more mind-boggling (is) the Power of All Creation stooping so low as to become one us us." [A Stone for a Pillow, p. 107,108]

Mary is the one person in this drama of Christian faith who reminds us that the world is our home. When we start believing that religion ought to be delivering us from this world, Mary reminds us that she bore God's son in her womb and gave him birth.

Mary is a reminder that the creation is good: that God is still creating, that every human birth is a conception by God's spirit and therefore full of enormous promise and potential.

Mary is a reminder that the Savior of the world was a child once and lived in a family, and in that family learned about his own humanity.

Mary is a reminder that our faith is in Jesus, who once laughed around a family dinner table and played with friends and learned to love the world by living in it, and on occasion being overwhelmed by it - just as it is for you and me.

Mary is a reminder that our Lord learned about enormous potential and the wonderful healing power of human love, and how it overcomes the fears and anxieties of childhood and adolescence - in relationship with his own mother.

Mary - bore him, loved him, nurtured him, corrected him, laughed with him.

Mary stayed with him and somehow watched him die and in a very real way gave him to you and me.

My deeply ingrained Protestantism won't quite allow me to ask her to pray for me at the hour of death, but I know what it means - and I am grateful for the reminder at the profound love of God to which it bears eloquent witness.

And I have no qualms about affirming her and thanking her for her son and I invite you to salute her...

**Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with thee** surely. **Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Amen.**